

**Q:** Good afternoon. Today is July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016. My name is Melanie Egan and I'm here at the Newton Free Library with Werner Gumpertz. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. What is your connection to Newton? And if you lived in Newton before and after your service what did you miss most about home?

**A:** What I missed most about home is the comfort that I go to work, the family, and everything else that goes with it. It's a completely different life. Everybody will tell you that.

**Q:** What is your connection to Newton?

**A:** My connection with the Army?

**Q:** To Newton.

**A:** To Newton? I really don't. I had no connection, but I wanted to go to MIT, so there was Boston as my target to go to MIT in Cambridge, and that was of course after the war and after I got out of the Army.

**Q:** What were you doing before you entered the service?

**A:** Before I entered my, the service I worked as a junior engineer in various places, as a surveyor in New York City, as a construction assistant in New York, estimating and so on, then transferred to Newport News, Virginia where I was involved in building defense housing. And can you shut off for a minute?

In case you're interested I had a funny experience many years later, did you want to hear about that, it has nothing to do with the Army?

**Q:** That's okay.

**A:** Okay, go on then.

**Q:** Okay. Where exactly did you serve?

**A:** I served, I was drafted in 1943, I served first at the Engineering Replacement Center in Virginia. I'm trying to think where George Washington's house was.

\_\_: Mt. Vernon.

**Q:** Mt. Vernon?

**A:** I forgot.

\_\_: Mt. Vernon?

**A:** Mt. Vernon, yeah, it was in the Mt. Vernon area. And I served there and then I served in Pennsylvania, and I went back to Virginia to the Engineering Replacement Center, then I went to the famous one.

\_\_: Maryland?

**A:** Maryland, yeah.

\_\_: Camp Ritchie.

\_\_: Camp Ritchie?

A: Yeah, Camp Ritchie, Maryland, where I took Intelligence School course. And then I went overseas, England, quick transfer across the channel, suburbs of Paris. And then I joined the 7<sup>th</sup> Army, Germany, as a translator and interrogator of prisoners. And that was my job for a long time. And after that the unit moved as the war went on. We wound up finally in Augsburg, Germany. After that I continued my work as an interrogator and all over the place. And then I joined the U.S. Military Government in Karlsruhe, Germany where I became the Agent in Charge of Publications, meaning periodicals and books. And I then decided to get a discharge after the war and went to Frankfurt to work for the U.S. Corps of Engineers as an engineer, spent a year there, and that was the extent of my Army service. After that I went to MIT.

Q: What was it like when you first arrived?

A: In Europe? Well, everything was smashed to bits. It is very difficult to explain it. But I remember that at one time after the war I took a vacation in Switzerland, and coming into Switzerland and seeing everything in good shape and painted and so on was essentially unbelievable. The changes between a peaceful country and a continent that had been through war was just unconceivable. I looked so many times and I didn't believe my eyes.

Q: What are a few of your most memorable experiences?

A: Well, there were probably two. One of them was I had a short conversation with Hermann Goring. Have you ever heard of him?

Q: I haven't.

**A:** Hermann Goring was the Chief of the German Air Force, a bigshot Nazi, and very well-known at the time, and a real character. He was actually in World War One as well as a well-known flyer and then joined the Nazis, and he was one of the most cruel agents of the Nazi movement at that time.

**Q:** Are there any particularly humorous or exciting memories from when you were on leave?

**A:** When I was?

**Q:** When you were serving, anything humorous or exciting?

**A:** Not that I can remember. Yes, there was one. When our unit moved up towards southern Germany and I was ordered to go with a small truck and a driver, and I set out as ordered and I suddenly realized that our unit was a little bit informal and they forgot to give me the key word for the night. Every night there was a different key word.

\_\_\_: Password.

**A:** So, I got a little bit worried. I had no key word. And there was shooting up in the air and everything else. And so I decided I better find out. And as we were driving by I saw a unit of the Corps of Engineers and I decided, well that's where I had my Basic Training, so I walked in, it was pretty late in the evening, and the CQ, Charge of Quarters, wanted to know what I wanted and I said, "I need the password." He said, "I better call the Officer of the day." So they dragged him out of bed and I told him I needed the password, because I hadn't gotten one. And he said, "You want what?" And then he heard my accent and he kind of opened up his gun cover and said, "What outfit were you in?" I said, "I was in the Corps of Engineers." I knew he had trained there, because all Engineer Officers were trained in the Fort Belvoir. And he said, "Tell me what

is the main street in Fort Belvoir.” And fortunately I remembered it and he put the gun back and gave me the key word.

**Q:** What is Camp Ritchie?

**A:** Camp Ritchie was an intelligence camp training school. There were obviously a lot of people like myself who spoke German. There were also Japanese soldiers and Officers. And we were all trained for intelligence, interrogation, and things that went with it. It was a fascinating experience for me, absolutely marvelous training. And up to this time there were a lot of people in this country who went through the training in Fort Belvoir, in--

\_\_: Camp Ritchie.

**A:** -- In Camp Ritchie, and we learned an awful lot. And a lot of people, like myself, went through the training. There were some interesting experiences also. There was, for example, training of how to combine innocent little documents and to try to learn something about the enemy.

So, as one of our graduation exercises two other soldiers and I were locked into a room, somebody came with a very large laundry basket and dropped documents from northern France that had been taken from the Germans. Now, these documents were not secret documents. They had taken out all secret documents. The only thing that was left were innocent things like laundry tickets and MPs that caught somebody speeding, and things of that sort, so all innocent things. And we were left alone for three days and using these hundreds of documents. And at the end of the time we knew the exact story of the German forces there, like how many men they had, what kind of weapons they had, what kind of leadership they had, including their names and ranks and everything else. And then one night they took us to the old battlefield of Gettysburg from the

Civil War, gave us a map, gave us a coordinate on the map where we were supposed to assemble with all the others, and everybody was left somewhere else.

So with the map we knew where we were supposed to go, but we didn't know where we were. So, then we had to compare at night the features of the Gettysburg battlefield and area near it until we could figure out where we were, because the map was printed in Japanese, so we couldn't read the street names or anything else. So, we finally identified, not knowing any Japanese, by the features of the country where we were, and once we knew where we were we also knew where we were supposed to go. But it was a very severe and high quality training.

So, after that training I went through several camps in order to go overseas. We went on a British liner, and that was my first experience with a hammock. I didn't like it. You fold together and so on and so forth. The rest of the trip I crawled under one of the tables and slept there. So then they brought us to England, then we crossed the channel on another ship to France, and that's how we got into Germany pretty quickly, and had some additional training and this sort of thing.

And I was in, as I said, the Intelligence section of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army.

**Q:** How did you choose that specific branch?

**A:** Because I knew German and I thought that would be a nice way of using that background.

**Q:** How did you join? How did you join the Army?

**A:** How I got there?

**Q:** How? Were you drafted?

**A:** How I joined Intelligence?

**Q:** Yeah.

**A:** That was pretty simple. I had a free day in my camp and I went to the Pentagon, you know the Pentagon, and spoke with one of the Intelligence Officers there and said, "I'm interested." And they got orders and within a week I was in Maryland to learn the trade.

**Q:** How did you adapt to military life?

**A:** It wasn't too bad, really. I'll give you one example. We learned how to stand guard under field conditions. You heard about standing guard in field conditions? So, there was always a Range Officer who explained it and he said, "Under field conditions you either stand or lie down and watch for anything." There is always a bunch of soldiers around. And the question that came to me is, comes a series of questions from soldiers to the Range Officers, the first question is always, "When do we eat?" The second question said, "Well, you explained to us how to watch if anything is coming up through the bushes or something, and then you told us to say 'Who is there?' And if I hear that voice and it has a German accent what do you do?" And the Range Officer says, "Well, the first thing you shoot him dead, and the second thing you ask some questions." And the whole company turned around and looked at me and started laughing like hell because of my German accent. So, there were just endless stories of that sort.

**Q:** How did you stay in touch with family?

**A:** U.S. Mail. They had V-Mail. I wrote a letter, it was censored, then the Army Post Office would photograph it into miniature, and then on the other end in the United States there would be another photograph enlarging it again, and it was sent to my family.

**Q:** Do you recall the day your service ended?

**A:** It was after the end of the war, obviously, because we had, I had been in the military government, so that was about early 1946.

**Q:** What was it like to return to regular life after the war?

**A:** I don't think there was any change. It's still work and obviously living was different, but it was pretty seamless for me. I was used to work hard. That's what I did.

**Q:** How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war?

**A:** I think I grew up pretty innocent, well-guarded by my parents and well-educated and so on. And that helped me taking things as they had to be as well as how I wanted them to be. And I was highly disciplined with myself, and the transfer to civilian life was seamless.

**Q:** What would you like people to know a hundred years from now?

**A:** Well, if somebody rises like Hitler make sure to sweep them fast. Don't let them go. It applies to today as well as to the beginnings of World War Two. The Western Powers were incredibly stupid to allow the growth of Germany.

**Q:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**A:** Well, it was a lifetime experience for me, like just about for every other soldier. And I went to MIT on the law that helped--

\_\_: The GI Bill.



**A:** -- The GI Bill that they call it, to get my education and support both tuition and a little bit of my living expenses, and it worked pretty well.

**Q:** Why did you choose MIT?

**A:** Because all my life I wanted to be an engineer. I had some engineering experience in Switzerland before I left for the United States. I didn't finish my course because of the war, so I certainly wanted to finish my engineering education, and I got my Bachelor's and two other degrees at MIT, partially teaching and partially working for the degrees, because it made it very easy for me. A lot of work, but it worked out effectively.

**Q:** Why did you want to become an engineer?

**A:** Why what?

**Q:** Why did you want to become an engineer?

**A:** That's a tough question. I think I was about three and a half years old when I decided to be an engineer, and I never changed my mind. That's what I wanted to do. That's what I did. I taught at MIT for a number of years and then with two other friends I formed our own firm. I'm still a little bit active in it, not much, because I am 98 now.

**Q:** Would you change anything about entering the war?

**A:** About my life?

**Q:** Yeah.

**A:** I can't imagine anything. I think under the circumstances I would do the same thing all over again.

**Q:** Did you have any close friends when you were in the war?

**A:** Yes I had some of them, but only a few that I kept in contact with, and so there are these friendships that start strangely. For example, once I was assigned to quarters in one of our places and there was another soldier who was supposed to share my room, and he said to me, "I want to give you a warning. I become mad like hell, murderous rage, and everything else if I am required to talk before 12:00 Noon." So I said to him, "Okay." And we became very good friends after 12:00 Noon. He had some special thing. And there were things like this.

I had another friend who was a wild driver and he, in a town, this was after the war, in this German town he made a deal with one of the German car agencies they wouldn't close until he had come in and checked in, because almost every day when he was out he would smash into something, and they had to get it late at night and fix the Jeep overnight so that they could turn it in first thing in the morning to the motor pool and it looked just like new. But they had steady work every day. Yes, you meet all kinds of strange characters in the service, but you learn pretty soon that is the way life is there and you make the necessary adjustments and you get along.

**Q:** Do you think you changed after the war?

**A:** Would I change it?

**Q:** Do you think you changed after the war?

**A:** I think, surprise surprise, I became more mature, but it was my growing up period anyhow, so I don't know whether the maturity came from the service or whether it was a natural development. When I worked as an engineer in Frankfurt before I came home I became very close to one of the people there, and we lived a rather interesting life, because we had interest in general as well as in our work as engineers. He happened to be also an MIT graduate and I had a really very good time, because the interaction with him and with other people, learned a lot about what happened in the war and there were some DPs-- do you know what a DP is?-- displaced person. Some of them worked in our office in Frankfurt and you learned things from him, from them too, and strange things like one of my friends got married, but he didn't, he was a DP, he was not an American, and he had quarters in Frankfurt, but just for him. And his wife wasn't allowed to come in there, but so of course he brought the wife in anyhow, and one day gets this note from military police, "It has come to our attention that you're living with your wife. This must stop at once." [Laughter] So they had to find quarters somewhere else and so on, but it was such a funny order. You learn something. Oh you can't live with your wife? Oh no.

**Q:** It looks like our time is just about up, so is there anything else that you would like to add?

**A:** If I get started on today's political situation I will never end, so I better keep my mouth shut.

**Q:** Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us and we're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

**A:** Well, it's very nice meeting you. Thanks for listening.

\_\_: After formally finishing their interview the participant shared another story which will follow without introduction here.

**A:** As my wife said, I was born in Germany and ran away from Hitler. When I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> Army our intelligence unit was very small, probably 20, 30, maybe 40 people. We didn't have any medical care in the time, so there were really incredible things going on and our Commanding Officer decided we needed a Medical Officer. He was told that our unit was too small to have one, so we went to the prisoners' compound, found a German Air Force Captain who was a Medical Officer in the German Army, and brought him in to our unit as our doctor. So, I got to talk with him for a while and he kept on talking about his father-in-law who was a Protestant Bishop in Germany, in Heidelberg. And he said this was one man who never gave in to the Nazis and kept on a decent life, which was very rare in Germany.

And after I went to Frankfurt I made contact with this man who had been tortured by the Nazis. He was a great man and one of the people who I still remember as an example of how to live, very intelligent, very kind, very interesting. And I kept on as long as he lived regular correspondence to remember that they weren't all Nazis. But that was a very elevating personal experience to find somebody completely different from what I experienced every day while I was a soldier in World War II. I just found the correspondence. I was going through some of my files and I found the correspondence with him. I saved it.

**Q:** Wow.

END OF INTERVIEW